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On the Principal Gramineae of Senegal and Their Utilization

/Sur les principales Graminées du Sénégal et leur utilisation

by J. B. Faur

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During the dry season the ground appears bare, but with the first rains it is covered with a lusty vegetation, and it is principally the Gramineae that thus again adorns with verdure this land previously so desolate. S 137

I. -- Gramineae: Food Crops

The petit mil /small millet/, mil chandelle or penicillaire /candle or penicillate millet/ (Pennisetum), is native to Africa. It is also cultivated in India; undoubtedly it was at the time of the slave trade that it was introduced into America. This is the early small millet, or souna of the Wolof. The souna must be sown at the time of the first rains. It shoots up promptly; it grows well in the light, sandy soils (groundnut soils). After the 15th of August it begins to ripen, and one can already eat the unripe ears roasted. When it begins to push out of the ground, the Senegalese, and especially the Sérère /Serer/, sow beans between the rows; this is the volet (Phaseolus vulgaris), which will be eaten as green beans from the 15th of August on. The souna root is regarded by the Africans as a poison and, according to them, might be one of the causes of sleeping sickness. S 243 W [243] S [252] S [244] S [753]

Another variety of small millet is the sanio of the Wolof, late millet or bearded millet (Penicillaria spicata). This is a late variety of small millet with the ears covered with very strong beards, which, entering the eyes of birds, prevents them from eating it. It is said that it gives sottiete (eye ailments). The sanio grows in heavy soils. It is sown during the rainy season and harvested at the end of it, at the same time as groundnuts. W [243] S [753]

The gros mil /great millet/, or basi of the Wolof, requires a heavy and clayey soil. It ripens much later than the souna and can be cultivated in the middle of the rainy season. Sometimes it can even be planted again toward the end of the winter season when one sees that the first sowings have failed. The great millet, or basi, is sorghum (Sorghum sudanense). W [243]

Millet reduced to flour and granulated is called "couscous." S 262

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This is the most common preparation, but the native cuisine is acquainted with a host of others. The couscous is light, refreshing, and very nourishing.

Millet is also given to horses. Basi is used the most in this practice, but souna gives them more vigor, although heating them up more.

The Africans, by making millet germinate and putting it in water to boil for several days, obtain a kind of invigorating beer (pouh in Wolof), but one which, if taken in great quantities, produces a very heavy drunkenness. Millet, just like maize, fattens animals quickly, especially poultry.

Sorghum is a plant widely cultivated in Senegal. It is necessary to accustom the Senegalese farmer as rapidly as possible to replacing the ordinary variety by that of the sweet sorghum, that is, the saccharatum variety, which would have the advantage of giving sugar and grain. This saccharatum variety is utilized a great deal in the United States for the production of sugar. Then a sugar refinery would be created, which would be one more source of wealth for this country, wealth all the more appreciable because the African is fond of delicacies and a great consumer of sugar (mint tea, Moorish coffee, and infusions).

Rice. It is cultivated in Senegal in damp places, on the edges of marigots /watercourses/, in Sine, in Casamance, and at the mouth of the river (Richard-Toll, etc.). A large number of varieties is known, some of which grow in relatively dry and high places; black rice is one of them.

The African rice is Oryza glaberrima, but wild rice grows by itself; this is Oryza latifolia (punctata and sylvestris). The native rice is much more in demand by the Africans and often even by the Europeans than foreign rice. African cooks excel in preparing rice in all kinds of ways.

Rice is emollient, soothing, very nourishing, and not at all binding or constipating as is sometimes thought. It also gives a beer by fermentation. Rice water renders great service in dysentery, as a beverage, and for bathing. Rice water is also a cooling drink for feverish and inflammatory ailments. Finally, rice powder is useful as an absorbent for skin diseases.

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Maize (Zea mays L.): Succeeds well when sown at the beginning of the winter season. The native species sown under these conditions is very beautiful and gives large yellow ears, very well filled out. The Africans eat fresh roasted corn, and, when it is hard, they make couscous of it. The infusion prepared with the fruit is emollient and diuretic. The styles or stigmas of maize are famous as diuretics and cure several ailments of the urinary tract (cystitis, gravel, dysuria, etc.); the young kernels, when cooked, constitute an excellent vegetable and replace peas; the flour gives a beer and an alcoholic extract. The husks of the ears serve to make quite springy mattresses.

II. -- Useful Gramineae

(not being subject to any cultivation)

Bamboo. -- Grows in the wild state in the Ravin des Voleurs /Ravine of Thieves/ near Thiès. The native species is rather small. Stakes, frames, masts of dugouts, huts, and fences, but especially clinting (constructions of bamboo filled in with lime) are made of it. The young shoots are said to be edible, and the sweet sap is supposed to be an agreeable drink. In Casamance a small species of bamboo grows in shady places; pipestems are made of it.

Begnefala (Andropogon shirensis). -- A tall gramineous plant with a penetrating aromatic odor. It is used in African medicine and the old colonials used it with success at the time of the great epidemic of yellow fever at Dakar in 1927. For fevers, one pounds the floral heads mixed with lemon or vinegar and energetically rubs the body with this mixture.

Hada (Imperata cylindrica). -- A gramineous plant with a very hard leaf and whitish ear, which is used for covering the roofs of huts.

Hat (Andropogon gayanus). -- Tall grass whose stem is used in making fences around huts.

Haham or cram-cram (Cenchrus biflorus). -- Its seeds fasten themselves to clothing and are very disagreeable. Is gathered and

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eaten as couscous in the south of the Sahara.

Some Gramineae give very fine hay, but one must hurry to harvest them before the dryness is well established, for then the Gramineae quickly lose their leaves and become not very nourishing. Besides, these hays are worth far less than those of Europe, even comparing plants of the same species with each other. Finally, the best local hay is still groundnut straw.

J. B. Faur.
(Dakar.)